

Maurice Hinchey NEWS

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HINCHEY RESPONDS TO VA SECRETARY'S VISIT TO HUDSON VALLEY, URGES END TO HEALTH CARE CUTS FOR REGIONAL HOSPITALS

WASHINGTON – U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey (D-NY) today responded to Veterans Affairs Secretary Anthony Principi's visit to the Hudson Valley, calling on Principi to end the Veterans Equitable Resources Allocation (VERA) plan, which has shifted funding for veterans' health care away from the Northeast to other parts of the country.

"I applaud Veterans Secretary Principi for coming to the Hudson Valley and seeing firsthand how VERA has short-changed our veterans," said Hinchey. "Veterans in our region deserve access to the same quality of medical care as veterans in other parts of the country, but they're being penalized because of where they live. Every year has been an emergency under VERA -- we have lost funding every year since it went into effect. This year, VISN 3 received \$74 million in emergency funds to compensate for the inadequacies of VERA, in order to maintain existing services.

"This is not equitable and something must be done. I look forward to working with Secretary Principi and the other members of Congress in our region to either scrap VERA or make dramatic revisions that devise a truly equitable formula for allocating veterans' health care dollars.

"Unfortunately, at a time when America's veterans are currently experiencing a marked deterioration in timely access to quality health care and benefit claims processing, President Bush's budget for veterans is wholly inadequate. The President's budget will only exacerbate these problems, as it falls \$1.1 billion short of the minimum necessary to even maintain the current level of services. Under this proposed budget, the quality of health care will decline and the backlog on processing benefits will only get worse."

Hinchey criticized President Bush's budget proposal for veteran's services. Although his budget increases discretionary spending for veterans' programs, including health care, by \$1 billion, that increase still falls woefully short of meeting current needs. In a joint letter from AMVETS, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and Disabled American Veterans on April 3, the organizations noted, "This recommended amount would not even cover the costs of mandatory salary increases and the effects of inflation."

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For the last three years, since the implementation of VERA began, Hinchey has offered an amendment to the VA appropriations bill that would block VERA and require the VA to provide adequate funding for veteran's health care in the Northeast. Hinchey expects to offer the amendment again this year.

The Veterans Equitable Resource Allocation (VERA) plan was implemented in 1997 to take into account population shifts and new needs in growing states. The VA has acknowledged that the funding shifts actually began several years earlier. Under the VERA initiative, VA hospitals in New York and across the Northeast and upper Midwest are losing funding.